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ABSTRACT

Two fundamental choices facing a prospective contractor receiving a request for proposal (RFP) are detailed--namely, whether to respond, and how to respond. Criteria to be considered when deciding whether to respond include the contractor's capabilities, requisite time to carry out the project, requisite time to respond to the RFP, incentives, impact, cost, re-usable products, insights, and counterpart competence. Criteria to be considered when deciding how to respond include the level of detail, tone, what to stress, a move beyond the RFP's prescriptions, and costs. A proposal needs to: (1) be responsive to the emphases of the RFP; (2) stress the special strengths of the contracting agency; and (3) include a series of tangible extras (some of them at no additional cost) which would make the project a winner. Two excerpts from an actual objectives-identification proposal to the South Carolina Department of Education are appended and illustrate both the choice of proposal style and suggested extra services and products. (RL)

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KEY DECISION POINTS IN A CONTRACTOR'S RESPONSE TO AN RFP*

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The initials RFP are becoming a sufficiently common component of current educational parlance that we sometimes fail to signify what these initials stand for, namely, request for proposals. But, as Gallagher has noted, in recent years we have seen a substantial shift toward contracted research and development, much of this activity being initiated by a sponsoring agency's promulgation of an RFP.[1] From the perspective of the increasingly numerous R & D contracting agencies that have sprung up to carry out such contracted work, an RFP triggers images ranging from a routine notification all the way to manna from heaven.

South Carolina's Requests for Proposals

In November of 1978, the South Carolina Department of Education issued an RFP to secure the services of an external contractor for purposes of identifying statewide basic skills objectives in reading, writing, and mathematics for grades 1-12. The Instructional Objectives Exchange (IOX) responded and was awarded the contract to carry out a six-months objective-identification project.

Eight months later, in July 1979, South Carolina issued a second RFP to cover a two-year test development project during which criterion-referenced tests would be constructed to assess the previously determined basic skills objectives in grades 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, and 11. Again, IOX responded and was awarded the contract.

Although there were substantial similarities between the two RFPs[2] and the responses to them, there were sufficient differences to induce

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[1]Gallagher, James J., "The Trend to Contract Research: Problems and Opportunities," Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, Vol. 1, No. 5, September-October, 1979, pp. 29-38.

[2]I am unaware of any sanctioned convention regarding an appropriate plural for RFP. Following the classic model provided by mother-in-law or handful, where in the plural we use mothers-in-law and handsful, one reckons that one should opt for RsFP. But it looks so silly. Hence, visual aesthetics have dictated the form employed here, that is, RFPs.

a bit of subsequent retrospection on the part of IOX staff regarding how it was that our agency reacted to these RFPs. More generally, it was thought that the analysis of key decision points in the responding process might be illuminating to our contractor colleagues as they wrestle with the choice of whether to respond to an RFP and, if so, how. I have grouped these decision points under three major rubrics which, in my view, constitute the two fundamental choices facing a prospective contractor: (1) whether to respond, and (2) how to respond.

Although these matters will be appraised in the context of the two requests for proposals from South Carolina, it is hoped that the generalizability of the contractor's options and decision criteria will be apparent.

Whether to Respond

Once an RFP hits the contractor's desk, the first necessary decision, of course, is whether or not to respond. Fortunately, sponsoring agencies haven't adopted an RSVP mentality, so if a contractor decides not to respond, that's the end of it. No "sorry, folks" letter needs to be transmitted.[3] The RFPs to which no response will be made are filed or discarded, then quickly forgotten. If a positive decision to respond is reached, however, the RFP is duplicated and assumes scripture-like qualities until our proposal is readied and arrives at the sponsoring agency's doorstep milliseconds before the stipulated deadline. What, then, are the criteria we use to reach a scripture/scrap decision?

Contractor Capabilities

An easy question to answer for contractors is whether the focus of the RFP falls within the expertise of their agency. If the RFP calls for development of survey questionnaires and interview guides, then IOX would quickly bow out because we don't have any skill or experience in doing such things. When an RFP calls for the creation of criterion-referenced tests, however, that's where we live. Without a doubt, we would give the RFP serious consideration.

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[3] In passing, it might be noted that we sometimes do issue a "sorry, folks" letter if we find a serious impediment in the RFP which precludes our response, e.g., unrealistic time lines or insufficient financial resources. We do this chiefly as feedback information for the issuing agency, although such letters undoubtedly serve to dissipate our annoyance at ill-conceived RFPs.

Most projects, at least those of the test development sort that we've been working at since the early seventies, are terribly difficulty for a contracting agency to consummate successfully even if the agency is loaded with requisite expertise. In the absence of such capabilities, you're destined for a disaster. We try to be very attentive to the factor of requisite expertise, particularly because ours is a relatively small agency and our areas of expertise are really quite limited.

It has to be recognized, of course, that the hungrier a contracting agency is, the more liberal will be its perception of local capabilities. If you're desperate for a new contract, you may wind up going after projects as developing tests, toys, or interstellar satellites.

In the case of both South Carolina RFPs, we were convinced that the tasks described truly bullseyed our capabilities.

Requisite Time to Carry Out the Project

Contractors need to beware of the perils of chocolate-lovers in a fudge factory--everything looks good enough to eat. But, just as a chocoholic has a limited stomach capacity, contractors have a finite number of staff members. Even though an RFP arrives with a terribly enticing task, the responsible contractor must decide whether there are enough competent staff members at hand to do the job--and whether they have enough time to do the job properly.

This is a really vexing problem for contractors, since one can always rationalize a bit by saying, "well, if we do get the contract, we can always add sufficient staff to carry out the job." But competent staff are devilishly difficult to come by. By the time we train a new cadre of developmental personnel at IOX, most projects would be over. Contractors must guard against avarice and unbridled optimism when surveying the time and talent they have at hand for new projects.

Some contractors have adopted an "anything-in-sight" mentality, and bid on more projects than they can possibly pull off successfully. Then, due to insufficient time and talent, they carry out a series of slipshod projects. We don't want to tarnish our reputation as a consequence of such an omnivorous stance. We'd like to be viewed as an agency that delivers what it promises.

Lest IOX come on as "above it all," let's recognize one key uncertainty in the RFP world, namely, a contractor is uncertain as to how

many hits or misses will occur as a consequence of the proposals submitted. If the approval rate for an agency is one out of every 10 proposals, then that agency better bid on lots of RFPs. But what if, in one aberrant period, that same contractor gets five of 10 proposals accepted? Clearly, as a consequence of overcommitments, the fat is in the fire. All is well, of course, if one of the RFPs called for fat-firing.

In the case of both South Carolina RFPs, we really believed we had the in-house staff to do the job and that enough time (barely) was available. We saw that we were short-staffed in the field of mathematics education for the test-development project, but figured we could recruit new staff in time should the project be approved. That recruiting effort proved to be much tougher than we had anticipated.

As we surveyed the projected timelines in the RFPs, set chiefly by the mid-1978 establishing legislation, we also anticipated getting underway a bit later than the sponsoring agency anticipated. It usually takes longer to get the necessary paperwork completed. Happily, in both South Carolina projects, these delays were minimal.

Requisite Time to Respond to the RFP

Sometimes you'd like to respond to an RFP, but the sponsoring agency wants a response within a few days of the RFP's issuance. Recently we received an RFP calling for a sophisticated R & D proposal. By the time it was received by contractors, they had essentially one week to prepare their proposals. We declined to bid, even though it was an interesting project and well within the range of our capabilities.

Fortunately, both South Carolina RFPs allowed a month or more for responses. As it turned out, the preparation of both proposals required almost all of the allowable time.

Incentives

So far, at least from our perspective at IOX, all of the aforementioned conditions have been necessary but not sufficient. We still have to ask ourselves, if we did receive this contract, is there sufficient payoff for us? Now what kinds of incentives do we attend to in reaching a go/no go decision?

Impact. At IOX the staff is committed to the improvement of educational practice. If the proposed project seems unlikely to benefit the

quality of schooling, training, admissions practices, etc., we don't bid on it. The more likely the project is to result in educational improvements, the more excited we get about it. In South Carolina, both projects were potentially high yield endeavors, having sprung from a well-crafted piece of legislation which emphasized the improvement of instruction.

Cost. If a project will cost more than the sponsoring agency has allowed for its completion, then not only will the contractor fail to make a reasonable profit, but the project will be poorly carried out because of inadequate financial resources. We don't bid on projects where the upper budget ceiling is, in our view, insufficient. This is particularly troublesome in the field where we do most of our work, namely, construction of criterion-referenced tests, since most educators carry around awfully insufficient notions of how much it costs to develop a high-quality criterion-referenced test. Frequently the financial allowances made by the sponsors might be sufficient for your run-of-the-norm traditional or teacher-made test, but fall woefully short of the cost requirements to whip up winning criterion-referenced measures.

In South Carolina, gratifyingly, reasonable allowances had been made for both the objectives-identification project ($125,000) and the test development project ($325,000 for five grades' worth of testing).

Re-usable Products. Sponsoring agencies can supply an effective incentive to potential contractors if they permit them to gain limited ownership of some of the products created during the project. In the South Carolina test development project, for example, the RFP stipulated that the contractor would maintain copyright over all test items if used for assessment purposes outside of South Carolina. This feature constituted a substantial incentive.

Insights. We also get enthused about a project from which we might learn something. In the South Carolina projects we foresaw the likelihood of picking up a score of insights. As it turned out, in South Carolina we learned more about basic skill assessment than we ever wanted to know.

In sum, when we reviewed each of the RFPs from South Carolina we discerned the high likelihood of payoff to us and to South Carolina's schools. We tackled with enthusiasm the task of preparing both proposals.

Counterpart Competence

When contractors carry out a project, it is with other human beings in the sponsoring agency. To work with competent counterparts can be exhilarating, since the high quality results of such collaborative synergism can astonish even the participants. On the other hand, if the sponsoring agency assigns a dolt to the project, then dull-wittedness can stifle the whole endeavor. The contracting agency must often infer from the sponsoring agency's RFP whether the intellects behind it reflect first or ninth stanines. In the case of both South Carolina RFPs we were sure that genuinely capable folks had fashioned the documents. They were lucid, well organized, and insightful. Subsequent interactions with our colleagues in Columbia vindicated our judgment. We were, indeed, working with first-rate folks.

In review, then, on all of the five dimensions set forth above, we found ourselves drawn toward responding to South Carolina's two RFPs. Let's turn now to the nature of those responses.

How to Respond

In preparing a response to an RFP, there's more than a bit of artistry involved. Even successful proposal-writers will find it impossible to explicate all of the rules they use in conjuring up proposals that outrank their competitors. Nonetheless, we'll set forth a few of the more salient considerations we use when spinning out a response to an RFP.

Level of Detail

Although my personal proclivity is for lean rather than labyrinthian proposals, we have discovered that considerable detail is usually needed in a successful proposal. After all, the architects of the RFP have usually devoted tons of time to the development of their document. They generally want to see painstaking attention given by prospective contractors to all of the ingredients in their RFP.

In responding to the South Carolina objectives-identification RFP we were less detailed than we should have been, often piggybacking onto the already elaborate procedural definitions in the RFP by phrases such as "we will follow the procedures set forth in pages 42-46 of the RFP." It turned out, however, that some proposal reviewers marked us down for this avoidance of step-by-stepishness. In the second proposal we were far more detailed.

Tone

One gets tired of writing in the arrid style of the scholarly community. It's more fun to try to turn a phrase or two so that the proposal readers will not nod off during the reviewing efforts. But what is a lively style to one reader will be viewed as flippancy by another. We try to walk a high-wire between these competing stylistic considerations, namely, seriousness and silliness.

In the initial proposal we tried to depart from the stultifying scholarly style of the academic. An excerpt is included in Appendix A. In the second proposal, perhaps because the stakes were higher, we toned down our frivolity considerably.

What to Stress

A proposal needs to be responsive to the emphases of the RFP. In some RFPs it is quite difficult to discern what the sponsoring agency's emphases really are. Fortunately, in both South Carolina RFPs those emphases were transmitted unequivocally. This was, in our view, a major virtue of both those invitations.

It is also necessary to stress the special strengths of the contracting agency. Since at IOX we only choose projects that coincide with our areas of strength, it is relatively easy to follow up with reams of rhetoric about that plucky band of criterion-referenced testers out in California. We tried to bang hard at our uniqueness on both South Carolina proposals.

Move Beyond the RFP's Prescriptions

Contractors should try to deal with all of the RFP's stipulations, then think creatively about what else might make the project successful. We tried hard to do this in both projects, and proposed a series of tangible extras (some of them at no additional cost) which would make the project a winner. For instance, in the test development project for South Carolina we offered six separate extras which we believed would result in a more effective project (see Appendix B).

Costs

In deciding how much to charge for services, a contractor is truly in the midst of the competitive RFP game. Since project cost is a factor in choosing among competing proposals, the contractor must decide just how much is enough or too much. It is a difficult decision. We

find ourselves continually perplexed by this task. In reaching closure on sticky budget issues, we often rely on a table of random numbers, adding dollar signs and decimals as the spirit moves us.

Clearly there's far more involved than has been set forth here in deciding whether to bid on an RFP and, having decided in the affirmative, how to create a good proposal. Hopefully, however, the foregoing remarks will highlight some of the major choice points faced by contractors. For IOX, at least, they constitute the major issues we face.

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Appendix A

An Excerpt Illustrating Style Choice from the Objectives-Identification Proposal

GENERAL APPROACH

In order to provide a more meaningful description of the general approach embodied in the project being proposed herein, in this section of the proposal we will depart from the typically R & D tone employed elsewhere in the proposal. Instead, a far more personal and anecdotal presentation style will be used. This personalized perspective will be employed since, in a very real sense, this proposal describes an intended series of tasks that one group of persons (the staff of the Instructional Objectives Exchange) would carry out for another group of persons (the staff of the South Carolina Department of Education). Indulgence is sought from those readers who are used to proposals structured along more traditional academic/technical lines.

Ten Years of Experience

First off, a bit of stage-setting. The Instructional Objectives Exchange (IOX) is an agency devoted to (1) the gathering and distribution of educational objectives and (2) the creation of criterion-referenced educational tests and related instructional materials. Established fully ten years ago in September 1968, as an agency IOX has had more experience than any comparable organization in the nation with respect to the collecting and refining of measurable instructional objectives. The founder and current director of IOX, W. James Popham, has devoted well over a decade and a half to the study of ways to make measurable instructional objectives more useful to educators. During the past five years, the IOX staff has spent more and more time in generating the sorts of criterion-referenced testing devices which can validly assess a student's mastery of a properly stated instructional objective.

As a consequence of these many years, we have learned much. Many of those lessons grew from early errors as we continually self-corrected in our attempts to create useful objectives and assessment devices for educators. In recent years, for example, Popham and the IOX Director of Test Development, Elaine Lindheim, have been able to work with increasing numbers of district-level educators to show them how they can create far more effective objectives and assessment devices by departing from the mid-sixties manner of stating behavioral objectives. Instead of devising seemingly endless lists of trivial, albeit measurable, instructional objectives, we are now urging educators to formulate their objectives in a way that, although still measurable, subsumes a number of lesser, en route objectives.

This stragegy, which we refer to at IOX as a "limited focus" measurement strategy, is detailed elsewhere.* It has served as the hub of several large scale objectives/measurement development projects carried out by IOX in recent years. We are convinced that adoption of a limited focus objectives/measurement strategy is a requisite precursor to the creation of a truly effective assessment program that has instructional improvement as one of its aims.

IOX is currently engaged in several projects, two of which are highly relevant to the proposed development activity in South Carolina. For the Detroit Public Schools we are now creating a limited focus high school minimum competency testing/instructional program. For a consortium of nine Southern California school districts we have just completed a limited focus high school examination system. Now we are in the process of developing a limited focus elementary level testing system for that same consortium. This system will articulate lower grade level objectives (competencies) with higher level objectives.

We are delighted with the progress on both these undertakings, since it is apparent that the limited focus notion of measurement we are endorsing is, as anticipated, leading to substantial improvements in the schools involved. Both of these limited focus test development efforts, as well as several lesser (but also limited focus) test development efforts, continue to move along most satisfactorily.

An RFP Arrives

In early November, South Carolina's detailed Request for Proposal (RFP) arrived at IOX. As is the case with most test development agencies we get a good many RFPs. Usually we review, then file them because they do not fall within our range of expertise or because we are already too heavily committed. But there were four features of the South Carolina RFP which made it different.

Requisite Expertise. First off, the RFP seemed to hit, dead center, the capabilities of IOX. We have been in the objectives-gathering game longer than any other agency, and, in truth, know more about the processing of objectives than just about anyone else. Even more pointedly, the work that IOX has been doing in California for the last three years, helping school districts articulate lower grade level competencies with higher grade level competencies, is almost identical to the analytic task called for in orchestrating a set of grades 1-12 objectives for South Carolina. And, finally, Popham's familiarity with state assessment intricacies was augmented considerably when he was appointed last year to a state-level legislative advisory committee charged with reviewing the California statewide educational assessment program and recommending improvements. After six months of intensive study of the California program's strengths and weaknesses, Popham was saturated with data about how to make statewide assessment programs purr. For all

*Popham, W. James. "Merits of Limited Focus Criterion-Referenced Measurement Strategies." A symposium presentation at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 19-23, 1976.

these reasons, the South Carolina RFP sketched a task which we knew we could do well.

A Well-Crafted RFP. The second attention-arresting feature of the RFP was the considerable thought and detail that had obviously gone into it. We get all sorts of RFPs at IOX. Some of them look as though they've been written on the way to the post office. Not so with the South Carolina RFP. This was a carefully thought out document which reflected high level analytic and organizational capabilities. Offered the opportunity to work with analytic and well organized professionals (as opposed to the other kind, of whom there are many), again we found ourselves drawn toward preparing a response to the RFP.

Compatible Limited Focus Orientations. A third feature of the RFP that we found enticing was the attention given to level of generality for the objectives. In many ways the guidelines for the identification of objectives (Appendix B in the RFP, pp. 3-4), in which contrasts are drawn among goals, outcome objectives, and enabling objectives, reflect a point of view highly consonant with the IOX limited focus orientation. It was clear that, if we undertook the project, we would be working with people who already recognized the virtues of subsuming enabling or en route objectives under more general rubrics.

Cruciality of the Objectives Identification Phase. But it was not an easy decision. Key IOX staff members were informed of the possibility of responding to the RFP and were asked to offer counsel. A number of staff members read the proposal and pointed out that a considerable amount of procedural, detail work would be involved. All those who considered the RFP, however, agreed to one inescapable conclusion, namely, if this initial objectives-identification phase of the South Carolina Basic Skills Assessment Program founders, then the whole program is destined to fail. The subsequent test development activities, if they are to be effective, must be based on properly conceptualized educational objectives. Perhaps this, more than any other reason, persuaded IOX executives to respond to the RFP. We believe that we possess the unique experience and capabilities requisite to make this initial activity a success. Without success here, subsequent failure is certain.

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Appendix B

An Excerpt Illustrating Extra Services and Products
from the Test Development Proposal

Partisanship Operationalized

Throughout our proposal we refer to IOX's commitment to the success of the South Carolina Basic Skills Assessment Program. This partisanship on behalf of the program is real, not just rhetorical. It is so real, in fact, that we wish to offer additional key services and products, beyond those stipulated in the RFP, all designed to ensure that the South Carolina Basic Skills Program achieves its full potential. If awarded this new contract IOX will supply, at no extra cost, the following six services and products:

1. Instructional Analyses based on each of the 78 detailed sets of test item specifications prepared during the project. These instructional analyses will be designed as documents to be distributed to teachers. They will consist of (a) a description of the instructionally relevant aspects of the measurement approach selected for the objective being considered, (b) an isolation of the key enabling or en route subskills students will need to master in order to master the objective, and (c) a general instructional strategy which, based on research-derived principles and practical teaching experience, offers a likely means for promoting learner mastery of the basic skill being sought. These analyses provide the key element in a system that seeks to link criterion-referenced measurement and instruction. With such guidelines teachers can devise and implement on-target learning sequences for each objective being measured.

   An illustrative instructional analysis, prepared to accompany the test item specification requested by the RFP, appears in Appendix B. All analyses would be prepared as typed, camera-ready copy. An introductory section, explaining the use of the analyses by teachers, as well as describing a series of instructional principles to be followed in competency-based educational programs, would also be prepared.

2. A Workshop on the Development of Skill-Relevant Instructional Support Materials. Staffed by the proposed Project Codirectors, W. James Popham and Elaine Lindheim, a two-day workshop would be offered in Columbia for Department of Education staff members and/or public school personnel designated by the Department. (These individuals might include representatives from the South Carolina school districts selected to field test basic instructional programs designed to raise student performance to statewide standards.) The purpose of the workshop would be to provide participants with the competencies needed to create (a) on-target practice exercises for the skills associated with the basic skills objectives themselves, (b) suitable practice exercises for the key

subskills associated with each basic skill objective, (c) validated self-instructional materials for use by students in the attainment of the basic skills objectives, and (d) other ancillary instructional support materials.

3. An Orientation Filmstrip-Tape Program describing the South Carolina Basic Skills Assessment Program. A 15-20 minute, cartoon-illustrated filmstrip-tape program for use with teachers and/or the public in orienting them to the main features of the South Carolina Basic Skills Assessment Program. A brief history of the program would be provided along with the major elements and mission of the basic skills program. Thirty copies of the filmstrips and audio cassettes would be provided for Department use. Additional copies could be secured by the Department at cost.

4. Skill Analysis Cassette Tapes for Teachers. A series of three prototype skill analysis cassette tapes for teachers would be provided to illustrate the potential utility of such audio cassette tapes in assisting teachers to understand the skills adopted in the South Carolina Basic Skills Assessment Program. Each of these cassette tapes would feature a dialogue between Elaine Lindheim and W. James Popham regarding the crucial elements in the skills being described. One tape would be prepared, at three different grade levels, in each of the three subject areas. For instance, the three skill analysis tapes might focus on (a) first grade reading objectives, (b) third grade mathematics objectives, and (c) sixth grade writing objectives. If these prototype analysis tapes appear useful to South Carolina teachers, the Department may choose to prepare additional tapes at all grade levels and in all three subject areas. Because of their low preparation and reproduction costs, such skill analysis tapes should prove to be a useful adjunct to the materials resources of the basic skills program.

5. A Draft Orientation Brochure for Parents which explains the basic skills program and, in particular, describes the program's requirement that parents/guardians of low-scoring pupils be notified of the pupil's performance and be given suggestions by which appropriate assistance can be supplied the pupil. This draft brochure, which would in all likelihood be revised to some extent by the Department staff along with members of the South Carolina Basic Skills Advisory Commission, will provide a head start for developing needed dissemination documents for the basic skills program.

6. On-call Consultancy to Assist in the Procurement of Federal Basic Skills Funds. IOX would assist Department staff as requested in the preparation of proposals seeking national Basic Skills funding, available through the Office of Education's Basic Skills and Educational Proficiency Programs, for the development of basic skills improvement programs.

As indicated earlier, IOX offers these additional services and products in a spirit of unabashed partisanship. We want the South Carolina Basic Skills Program to be a success, not only for the educational well-being of South Carolina's children, but also because the program's elements

are worthy of emulation by other states. We believe that the additional products and services sketched here, in combination with our overall philosophic orientation to test development and our agency's unique capabilities, can provide a winning combination for South Carolina.

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